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ABSTRACT

Finding summative evaluation methods lacking in relevance to specific programs within special education, a serial evaluation process was initiated to promote evaluation utilization in a California suburban school district. This method evolved during 5 years of evaluation activity with six strategies facilitating the development: (1) idenification of evaluation questions; (2) development of general content and techniques for interviews and surveys; (3) addressing multiple questions; (4) involvement of various educational personnel and parents; (5) selection of samples through a student data base; and, (6) the development of a longitudinal evaluation data base. This process overcomes the difficulty of total program evaluation, the aggregation of student achievement, and the lack of timely information for decision makers. (PN)

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EVALUATION UTILIZATION:

DEVELOPMENT AND IMPACT OF A SERIAL EVALUATION PROCESS

FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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Evaluation Utilization:

Development and Impact of a Serial Evaluation Process
for Special Education Programs

This paper describes an evaluation process which deals with the many problems involved in the evaluation of a special education program in a large suburban school district in California. As a result of the evaluation efforts over a period of years, a model incorporating serial evaluation activities was developed. This model promoted administrative use of evaluation findings.

Background

California changed its special education programs in 1974, with the adoption of a "Master Plan for Special Education." One unique provision of this plan was the requirement that local districts plan and implement local program evaluations. Because of this provision, a program evaluator for special education was hired. The evaluator found that traditional summative total program methods were difficult to apply to special education.

Summative evaluation methods lacked relevance to specific programs within special education. Special education is not a single "special education program", but rather a series of separate programs, each serving students with unique needs and problems. These programs are distinguishable by one or more of the following: type of student handicap, administrative structure, ages of students, variety of services being provided, and/or individual student goals. In addition, teachers and parents of these students form distinct populations--in some ways similar, and in other ways very different. Such program variety requires a corresponding variety in the approach to program evaluation.

Furthermore, summative evaluation reports were not timely enough for administrative use nor were they specific enough to be used for programmatic change. This lack of administrative utilization led the evaluator to search for better methods of evaluating special education programs.

The development and use of a different process for special education evaluation rather than a summative method evolved during five years of evaluation activity. Such a structure for evaluating large and complex ongoing programs has been characterized by Lewy as "serial evaluation activities" (1981). When a series of short-duration or "focused" studies are used for evaluation, specific issues or aspects of a program are selected for study rather than the program as a whole. The following sections will trace how the evolutionary process took place, and will then emphasize some of the areas to be considered in using such a serial evaluation process to promote evaluation utilization.

First Year Evaluation

As the evaluator completed the initial study of several aspects of the total special education program, a final report on the year's evaluation activities was prepared (Enell, 1977). Among the study findings were total counts of objectives accomplished by special education students during the year (this was information which the state requested). Other studies were conducted on measurement of student attitudes, and general staff and parent reactions to the integration of handicapped students. This report was presented to the special education administrative staff with little observable effect.

Second Year Evaluation

Dissatisfied with the reception of the first report, the evaluation focused during the second year on the more unique components of special education rather than the total "special education program." One of these components was the integration of learning handicapped students into regular classrooms. An interview study was conducted to determine the acceptance of these students by regular teachers and students. This major study, involving 240 interviews, was to form the pattern for latter studies. Its methodology included random selection of participants, the development and field testing of the interview questionnaires, collection and analysis of the data.

Another component that was evaluated was student achievement--especially among the mildly learning handicapped. Provisions were made to collect achievement test information each year following the time students were intially evaluated and during the total district achievement testing. The latter achievement testing used "out-of-level" testing so that students would be more fairly tested at appropriate instructional levels.

Again at the end of the year a final report including these and other studies was prepared (Enell, 1978). It was preceded, however, by a special report on the interview study (Barrick, 1978). This special report was presented directly to the program support staff soon after the study was completed, and it was well-received--better, in fact, than the final report.

Third Year Evaluation

Believing that the lack of evaluation impact was due to addressing the wrong topics, the evaluator sent the management staff a listing of possible evaluation questions before the third year's evaluation was begun. The staff assisted in prioritizing the questions according to their interests. This staff involvement evoked interest in the evaluation activities. Special reports on particular aspects of the evaluation, such as the time use of resource specialists, the application of the eligibility criteria, and the time students spent on the bus, were made as each study was completed to the parent advisory committee or to the program management staff.

As in the previous two years, a total, final evaluation report was prepared, covering all of the year's activities (Enell, 1979). A brief report on the evaluation was presented to the district board of education, based on an executive summary of the various findings, and this was well-received. No specific use was made of the findings, however, for program change or improvement.

Fourth Year Evaluation

As the fourth year began, the administrative staff were again involved in suggesting and selecting questions for study during the year.

In this year the first re-cycling of previous surveys began. The parent and teacher surveys contained a number of items identical to items used the previous year. An improved special education student data base provided easier selection of particular samples for study, whether students or parents.

A second study was conducted of student achievement in reading, spelling and mathematics over one and two years of program service. The hearing impaired were added to the achievement testing, using a version of a national test adapted for this population. This year's testing provided a base line for subsequent achievement studies on this population.

Continuing the thrust on early dissemination for administrative utilization, special study reports were prepared and presented to administrative staff members or parents as each individual study was concluded. A final report including all studies was also prepared at the end of the year (Enell, 1980).

Fifth Year Evaluation

Now able to draw upon a wide variety of studies, the evaluation plan developed with the administrators consisted of both "continuing" studies (certain studies to repeat from year to year) and "special" studies (intended to last for a small part of one year).

In this year previous study methods were used again. The integration study of the second year was repeated with a new sample (Stracener and Enell, 1980).

Parent surveys, expanded from the same basic pool of questions as used in previous years, were sent to selected groups of parents whose children were in programs of administrative concern.

More intensive analyses of achievement test data were made for students who had received program services for two and three years.

During this year a special study was designed to produce a rapid turn-around evaluation of one particular program--the adoloscent seriously emotionally disturbed. This study was planned, conducted and reported within a two-month time period, and administrative decisions for the next year were made on the basis of the report (Enell, 1981).

At the conclusion of the fifth year of program evaluation, all special studies had been presented to the concerned audiences through special reports covering each topic. Rather than compiling yet another "final" report, a compilation was made of the major findings from the five years of evaluation studies. This abbreviated report found immediate use as part of an informational packet sent to a legislative advisory group (Enell, 1982a).

Sixth Year Evaluation

As the sixth year began, program administrators, aware of this evaluation flexibility, posed some major program questions. These were easily incorporated into the total evaluation plan, as part of either the special or the continuing studies. For example, because of the success noted from the followup study of the integration of the learning handicapped students, the study was repeated once more--this time to study the integration of students having hearing, vision, physical or mental retardation problems (Enell, 1982b). Although this year is not over, there is little doubt that the evaluation findings from the various studies will be utilized by the program administrators.

Application of a Serial Evaluation Process

In retropect, six strategies facilitated the development of a serial evaluation method for special education programs. These six strategies are:

1. Identification of evaluation questions

   Initially, administrative staff were not too anxious to evaluate particular curriculum or program activities, but tended to be more concerned about administrative arrangements. By involving staff in the selection of more pertinent evaluation questions, they began to understand how evaluations could address questions of major concern to them. Staff involvement in the selection of evaluation questions created more administrative interest in the findings and more dependency upon the results for decision-making.

2. Development of general content and techniques for interviews and surveys

   Repeated use of similar designs has made it easy to conduct particular studies. The interview studies, for example, can be carried out within a six- to eight-week time frame with one interviewer conducting 160 or more interviews. Parent and teacher surveys include a core of common questions which can be repeated from year to year with only minor modifications, providing longitudinal data. These core questions are supplemented by additional questions pertinent to the particular concerns or the program and/or population of administrative interest.

3. Addressing multiple questions

   Although some studies require unique surveys or interview schedules, many of the continuing studies include items related to a number of different concerns. Thus a parent survey might include questions about integration time, satisfaction with busing and parent workshops, as well as core questions related to student progress and general program satisfaction. During the six years of evaluation there has been no single instrument called a "needs assessment." Recent surveys, however, have provided information which has been used by program administrators to determine the staff and/or program needs for the following year.

4. Involvement of various educational personnel and parents

Proposed schedules for evaluation activities--testing, visits, surveys--are reviewed and approved by the appropriate administrators from both regular and special education. Care is taken to schedule evaluation activities so that schools are uniformly, yet not overly involved. Parents provide help in designing and carrying out parent surveys. Program managers participate as interviewers and IEP reviewers. Administrative interns, early retirees and university graduate students provide evaluation help. The involvement of others has not only spurred interest in the evaluation activities, but has made it possible to conduct many studies which would have been impossible for a single evaluator. Involvement has also led to greater interest in study findings and promoted their utilization.

5. Selection of samples through a student data base

Many of the studies which were conducted relied in part or in total upon information available through the special education management information system. Because information such as initial entry to program, age, handicap, learning goals, school to which assigned, neighborhood school, transportation needs and testing information is readily available, it is possible to get selective counts and/or lists of students, parents or teachers in a great number of combinations. Random or stratified samples can be selected according to the particular population of interest in the evaluation. Without such a base, it would be much more difficult to conduct focused evaluation studies.

6. Development of a longitudinal evaluation data base

Because of the cycling of studies in a yearly and/or programmatic manner, it is possible to build each year on the previous years to develop an evaluation picture that can be viewed longitudinally. Using similar studies with different groups of students, parents, teachers and administrators allows changes to be noted both within and between groups. This long-range view of program change and development also provides a sense of accomplishment for the program administrators and staff.

Conclusion

Now, from the perspective of six years' of activities, the methodology for special education evaluation seems rather clear. This was not the case during the early years. It was only as persistent attempts were made to meet the needs of program administrators and thus to increase the utilization of the evaluation findings, that a methodology emerged. This process, whether called focused evaluation studies or serial evaluation, has led to greater utilization of evaluations by decision makers. They know the investigative questions in advance, the results are reported through small, concise mini-reports soon after the activities are completed, and the findings are available in time for utilization in decision making.

The serial evaluation process overcomes three evaluation problems frequently noted by evaluators working in special education: the difficulty of total program evaluation, the aggregation of student achievement, and the lack of timely information for decision makers.

The first problem, total program evaluation, is met directly by evaluating the subprogram groups within special education. Focused or serial evaluations can study in depth selected services, programs or student groups.

A second problem, aggregating special education student achievement, is overcome by having the individual student be his own control. Testing information gathered over several years can show progress. When stored in a data base, the achievement relative to particular student populations can be aggregated and progress displayed. Repeated measures used in the serial evaluation process can provide aggregated achievement information for specific student groups.

The third problem, that information is too difficult to acquire in a timely fashion, can also be overcome through a serial evaluation process. Rather than depending upon a final end-of-year report, reports of each short study can be made as that study is completed. Urgent issues for study that emerge during a year can be added to the evaluation design or can replace a study which is found to be of lesser importance.

The serial or focused evaluation study is a counterpoint to the summative evaluation--yet it is not to be confused with formative evaluation. Rather, it is a series of mini-evaluation or research studies which may or may not be aggregated into a "final" report. The important objective of the serial evaluation process is to supply administrators involved in the decision-making process with timely, usable information. This objective can be achieved.

Although special education is still too multi-faceted to evaluate as a single program, its component parts--whether different groups of handicapped students, different program services, or other unique groups such as those remaining in programs for three years--can be studied, reported in a timely fashion, and the evaluation information can be utilized.

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Appendix A

Appendix A presents a matrix displaying by year and by content area the various evaluation activities on which this paper is based.

San Juan Unified School District

Areas of Special Education Evaluation 1976-1982

School Year	Student Achievement	Student Attitudes	Admin. Satisfaction	Teacher Satisfaction	Parent Satisfaction	Staff Satisfaction	Service Provision	Ads/Cost Findings	IEPs	Special Studies
1976-77	IEP Objective Achievement Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT)	Survey of Attitudes toward Students, School, Study, Self (S-Quad Survey)		Survey	Survey	Interviews	State Report			• Program Review (State)
1977-78	WRAT Iowa Tests of Basic Skills	Special Interviews: Integration S-Quad Survey (Attitudes)	Survey	Special Interviews on Integration Survey	Telephone Survey	Survey	State Report	Fiscal Report	IEP Review	• Program Review (State) • Barrier-Free Survey
1978-79	WRAT ITBS	S-Quad Survey	Interviews	Survey (SRI)	Survey	RSP Time Utilization Interviews Survey	State Report District Reports	Fiscal Report		• Eligibility Criteria Study • Transportation Time
1979-80	WRAT ITBS 2 & 3 Year Study Stanford Achievement Test for Hearing Impaired Competency Test	S-Quad Survey	Interviews	Survey	Survey of All Special Ed. Parents	Survey of Work Activ. Inservice, Support Services	Multiple Services State Report District Reports	Fiscal Report	IEP Review	Paper Work Study--District & State
1980-81	WRAT ITBS 3 & 4 Year Study SAT-HI Comp.Test-Graduation Speech Tests	3-Year Follow Up Interviews on Integration S-Quad Survey		Survey Interviews on Integration	Survey (Special Center & New Parent)	Survey Interviews on Integration	Percent of Integration State Report District Reports	Fiscal Report	IEP Review	• SED Prog. Eval. • Referrals & Eligible Placemer • Vocational Preparation • Program Review (State)
1981-82	All above Tests Differential Standards	Interviews on Major Handicap Integration S-Quad Survey	Interviews	Interviews on Integration Survey	Survey More than 5 years Not at Home School	Survey	Changes in Integration Time	Fiscal Report	IEP Review	• Integration of Major Handicaps • Criteria Application